

Real,  
Not-Real



OPEN BOOK 002  
Real, Not-Real  
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*[The following is a transcript of a presentation made by Gerber on the occasion of the publication of the Artists' Work Classification at Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen in Innsbruck, Austria, on November 21, 2006]*

For the last few years I have been working with a project centered around a classification of artists' work practices. I have been researching and documenting artists' labor, using standard social science research methods, in order to create a classification system for that labor – for the everyday activities that artists engage in to produce their work. The project takes the form of a small book outlining the artists' work classification system, laid out as if for use by artists in order to catalog their labor. A viewer, coming across the book by chance, would assume at first that the book was meant for use by professional artists. The book's design and printing were completed this month and in the next weeks I will send 500 copies of the book to public, academic, and institutional libraries for shelving.

I have been interested in the ideas and assumptions that a viewer could come to when confronted with this new artifact. In this project my interest in a tension between contemplation and function is, I hope, clear. I have made a book that looks "real" – is "real" in many ways, perhaps is "real" – that is encountered by the viewer in an everyday situation: while browsing in a library.

There is a valid question to be asked here about the real and the functional, about what happens when art gets too close to "real life." I would argue that what is and is not art has mostly to do with intention and reception, but I'm not interested in going into that here. Instead I will point out the ways in which this work is "real" and the ways in which it is "not-real," and I will try to discuss why these distinctions have been important to me. In the following I will refer to the viewer / reader as a "browser," as my "ideal viewer" (again, quotation marks, fraught with the reluctance of the phrase) is one who comes across the book by chance.

For those of you who find this type of account boring or unnecessary, I will show a video while I speak. While the video might be equally dull, its repetitive structure might provide a screen on which you can project your own thoughts. Personally, I find these sorts of expositions problematic, but I am also interested in the format, in a sort of essay, so I will continue with this experiment.

*[Gerber starts a video projection, a black-and-white film of an artist working; the artist's activities are coded and named in subtitles that flash across the bottom of the screen every ten seconds.]*

I will point out a few things that I feel are important in terms of the content of the work. All of these things are visible or otherwise discoverable for the interested viewer.

Some of the ways in which the Artists' Work Classification is real:

The Artists' Work Classification takes the form of a book that is shelved in libraries in order to be available primarily to the browser. The book's design and manufacture conforms to its purported content and function. The browser comes to a book that looks and feels like the reference work it is meant to seem to be. Many libraries will reinforce the binding - covering it with a stronger or waterproof material, or converting the paperback to hardcover - further implying that the book is meant for heavy and regular use. The book is made to look as though it is an inexpensive, utilitarian little volume that sits on every professional artist's desk, ready to assist the artist in carrying out his or her administrative work. For me it is important that the book look as "real" as possible, that visually it does not strike the browser as anything out of the ordinary, other than in its newness. Not all libraries that received the book will shelve it, though I have found through preliminary discussions with librarians that most will. Libraries rarely throw away books, instead selling them or donating them to other organizations, so those books that

are not shelved in the libraries they were originally sent to will live out the life that such a book would in the greater world – arriving on the shelves of private persons, in used bookstores and charity shops, and in storage in closed stacks.

The Artists' Work Classification contains data that to one extent or another is "good." While the discussion of what we can and cannot learn through the scientific method is an interesting one, I will simply state here that data was gathered through large-scale surveys, through interviews with artists, and through structured experience sampling activities carried out by volunteers. The taxonomy itself was built to the best of my abilities, also through the use of standard methods. It is important to me that the data that makes up the classification is "good," or at least that it appears to be good to the browser. The content of the taxonomy is perhaps the first place that most browsers will notice a slippage – the work being classified is not work that normally fits into such a structure, and the fact of its classification is obviously problematic – and it is important to me that this slippage is found in the browser's own mind, not through the recognition of caricatured, obviously false data.

Some of the ways in which the Artists' Work Classification is not-real:

The Artists' Work Classification is to be shelved as an "artists' book". The book has been given the Library of Congress call number N7433.4 .G47 A7 2006. The use of a Library of Congress call number is a standardized activity understood by most – perhaps all – librarians. The first part, N7433.4, is for books that are "produced by artists and intended as visual art objects". If the book were "real" it would be classified under N8350 (Art as a profession) and, thus, would be shelved in a different section of the library, along with accounting manuals and materials safety handbooks. The books will be sent together with a letter explaining the project and encouraging librarians to contact either myself or the curator at Künstlerhaus Büchsenhausen, letters that make clear the

status of the book as an artwork. My intention in controlling as far as possible that the book would be shelved as an artists' book, rather than as a professional and technical manual, is to produce one space for a sort of slippage to occur. The browser will probably not immediately register the placement of the book, but the book's home amongst other bookworks provides one site for dissonant content to slip through.

The Artists' Work Classification book ends with an overview of the classification. This is followed by blank pages and finally, on the last page, the reader finds information on the author. Rather than providing the author(s)'s research affiliations and university posts, it says simply "Alison Gerber (b. 1979) is an artist living in Malmö, Sweden." This short biography is followed by my thank yous, in which the work is referred to as a "project" and the institutions thanked are both obviously art institutions – not universities or other research institutions. The browser who makes it to the end of the book, or who is curious about the background of the researchers behind the classification, will find that the book is perhaps more (or less) than what it appears to be.

The data in the Artists' Work Classification has been compiled not by a scientist acting in accordance with generally accepted scientific procedures and ethics, but by an artist making an art project. I have not worked in concert with a research institution that could have had oversight, and I have now destroyed all the data I collected in making this project, making checking and sharing data impossible. Because I have not adhered to the norms of the scientific community, no scientist will be able to build on the "research" I have done (it is a far too shaky base), and no one will be able to put the classification into use – it's an art project, after all, and what kind of basis is that for legislation or for a contractual agreement? I am interested in the relatively nonporous borders of the scientific disciplines and the ways that lack of flexibility can be used to create meaning. I did not collaborate with a research institution or follow generally accepted scientific method because the Artists' Work Classification should have only

a theoretical tension between consideration and utility – I wanted a safeguard that would insure that the book could not be used as the taxonomy it mimics.

Finally, there is the question of my intention, another feature in the category of the “not-real”.

It is at this point difficult for me to draw the line. For the past three years I have been discussing my intentions with this project with nearly every person I have met. I have discussed the project from seemingly every vantage point and have developed, I think, a reasonably considered discourse around the project. I have thought about – and talked about – this project in terms of the science of classification; the place of artists in a social system that includes pensions, health care, child care, and unemployment insurance; professionalization in the visual arts; the Iowa Nursing Interventions Classification; the Danish Young Artists and Art Workers Union; the development of Ph.D. programs in the visual arts; Kantian epistemology; the Canadian Artists and Producers Professional Relations Tribunal; positivism; the image of the artist-genius; Bourriaud’s model of operational realism; the responsibility of the state-supported artist to the taxpayer; the disciplinary status of contemporary art; the artist vs. the professional artist vs. the hobby artist vs. the amateur; and industrial task analysis. I am probably forgetting here several key conversations. But I, personally, am rarely interested in long, drawn-out explanations of the artist’s intent. At a certain point, I feel that the artist who says too much is in effect saying, “But what I meant was... but, what this actually means is...” I like art with footnotes, not more. I have already said, I think, far too much. So I will leave the issue of my intention here, in the category of the not-real, categorized but unclarified. I hope that here I have pointed out some important points available in the experience of the work; I will leave the project, now, to the browser.

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